DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 241 605 UD 022 828

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TITLE Education for Cultural Pluralism: A Progressive, Realistic Goal or Opportunistic, Utopian Rhetoric?
PUB DATE 22 Apr 83
NOTE 26p.; Plenary address presented at the annual conference of the National Association for Asian and Pacific American Education (5th, Chicago, IL, April 22, 1983).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Asian Americans; *Bilingual Education; *Cultural Pluralism; Educational Trends; Elementary Secondary Education; Futures (of Society); Higher Education; *Multicultural Education; *Pacific Americans

ABSTRACT

The concept of cultural pluralism and how it is being applied to education, particularly in terms of its implications for Asian/Pacific Americans, is addressed in this paper. First, historical background to the emergence of cultural pluralism as a concept in education (and its institutionalization as multicultural education) is briefly reviewed. The concept is then re-examined, with a look at some of its inadequacies and a proposal that it be broadened to "socioeconomic cultural pluralism." A retrospective analysis of how the Asian/Pacific American Movement fits into this broader context follows, along with a discussion of what Asian/Pacific Americans have learned from involvement in this movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Some of the current problems and challenges facing Asian/Pacific Americans, particularly in the field of education, are then discussed. Finally, ideas on future trends and alternative approaches to societal problems and the implications of these trends and approaches for the education of Asian/Pacific Americans are considered. (CMG)

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EDUCATION FOR CULTURAL PLURALISM: A PROGRESSIVE, REALISTIC GOAL OR OPPORTUNISTIC, UTOPIAN RHETORIC?*

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by

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

INTRODUCTION

Thank you very much. It's a pleasure to be here. This is the fourth of the five NAAPAE conferences I've attended, having missed only the first NAAPAE conference in San Francisco back in 1979.

I'm very happy to see NAAPAE surviving as an organization because I think it's very important for Asian/Pacific Americans to maintain a national thrust. There have been very few viable national organizations of Asian/Pacific Americans with the kind of broad concerns that NAAPAE has; in fact, NAAPAE may now be one of the few that are left. NAAPAE is performing an important and much needed service to the Asian/Pacific American communities; and so, I congratulate and strongly commend all of you who have put so much time and effort into making NAAPAE what it is today.

Now, in thinking about the theme of this year's conference and what I could talk about today that would relate to that theme, I rather deliberately chose what I thought might be a provocative title, "Education for Cultural Pluralism: A Progressive, Realistic Goal or Opportunistic, Utopian Rhetoric?" I chose that title because I think we need to re-examine the whole concept of

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*Plenary address presented at the Fifth Annual Conference of the National Association for Asian and Pacific American Education (NAAPAE), Chicago, Illinois, April 22, 1983.

cultural pluralism and how it's being applied to education, particularly in terms of its implications for Asian/Pacific Americans.

Therefore, in order to address this issue in my talk today, I will cover the following five major topics: First, I'll briefly review the historical background to the emergence of cultural pluralism as a concept in education. I will follow this with a re-examination of the concept of cultural pluralism and some of the inadequacies I see in the concept. After setting this broader context, I will present a retrospective analysis of how I see the Asian/Pacific American Movement fitting into this context and what I think we have learned from our involvement in this Movement during the 1960's and 1970's. I will then discuss some of the current problems and challenges I see facing Asian/Pacific Americans, particularly in the field of education. Finally, I'll discuss some of my ideas on future trends and alternative approaches to our societal problems and the implications of these trends and approaches for the education of Asian/Pacific Americans.

THE EMERGENCE OF CULTURAL PLURALISM AS A CONCEPT IN EDUCATION

Let me begin by briefly reviewing the historical background to the emergence of cultural pluralism as a concept in education. I think that some historical perspective is needed in order to understand the concerns and issues that people are grappling with today.

The historical antecedents go back to the turn of the century when the massive immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe was taking place, bringing an estimated 30 to 40 million people into this country. This massive influx of humanity, coupled with industrialization and urbanization, led to severe social problems, including overcrowded urban ghettoes, increasing crime and political corruption, and violent labor conflicts.

In the face of these problems, the flood of immigrants was viewed with great alarm by the dominant, native-born WASP's and triggered the reactionary Nativist Movement. Starting in the late 1800's, this movement reached its height during and after World War I and, interestingly enough, was directly primarily at white ethnic groups of Eastern and Southern European origins, resulting in widespread violence against these groups, including several lynchings. In fact, during the 1920's, these white ethnic groups were the primary targets of the Ku Klux Klan. The Yellow Peril Movement on the West Coast was indirectly linked to the Nativist Movement and resulted in even more devastating consequences for Asians and Pacific Islanders, including race riots, lynchings and other atrocities.

Nativism was, in turn, aided and abetted by the so-called Americanization Movement, whose supporters wished to quickly and forcibly assimilate the millions of new immigrants into the so-called mainstream of American society. The public schools played a major role in this movement through their intensive efforts to Americanize the children of the immigrants. Asian/Pacific American children were subjected to similar pressures, even as many of them were forced to attend segregated schools.

As a result of the Nativist and Americanization Movements, millions of white ethnics were forcibly and traumatically acculturated into the American mainstream. The almost total obliteration of the cultural identities of these groups, which are only now being painfully revived, testifies, I think, to the brutal effectiveness of these movements. Similar traumas of acculturation were also experienced by many Asian/Pacific Americans.

Sad to say, only a few voices, such as that of the philosopher Horace Kallen, were raised in protest against these reactionary movements. Kallen was among the first to articulate the philosophy of cultural pluralism which he argued was a more democratic alternative to Anglo-conformity. However, the

protests of Kallen and other pluralists of that time were ultimately overwhelmed by the powerful forces of Americanization and the growing industrial corporate state. Anglo-conformity, often thinly disguised in the Melting Pot metaphor, became the dominant ideology and has strongly influenced the shaping of our social institutions, especially the schools, even to this day.

During the past two decades, however, the philosophy of cultural pluralism has experienced a strong revival, largely as a result of the social upheavals of the 1960's. As turbulent as this decade was, it will probably go down as one of the most exciting, idealistic and hopeful decades in the history of this nation. The early part of this decade was marked by the Civil Rights Movement and the outbreak of urban riots in cities across the nation. These events were followed by the Black Power Movement and other similar movements by Hispanics and Native Americans. And then, toward the latter part of the decade, we saw the onset of the Anti-Vietnam War Movement.

In response to these actions by masses of people, we saw the launching by the Federal government of the War Against Poverty, Affirmative Action, Job Corps, and many other social programs that were intended to eliminate poverty, inequality and social injustice in our society. This was obviously a very optimistic period when social activists thought just about anything was possible and that our society could be radically transformed into a new utopian society. Speaking from personal experience, I can say that those were certainly very heady days! If we could only reactivate even a fraction of the optimism, idealism and energy of those days, I think we would be making far more progress today than we are.

The field of education was certainly not shielded from the social upheavals of that period. Conflicts over such issues as segregation and

community control of the schools forcefully called the attention of educators to the deplorable state of schooling for minority children and to the atrocious conditions and racist practices that prevailed in most urban schools. And as a result of their involvement in these struggles, many minorities became much more aware of the pervasiveness of the Anglo-conformity bias in our schools and increasingly concerned about the damage this bias was inflicting on the minds of minority students. Such concerns led to demands by various minority groups for alternative approaches to education that would better serve the needs of minority students. Consequently, we saw the Federal government launch such programs as Compensatory Education, Headstart, Upward Bound, Bilingual Education, Teacher Corps, and Ethnic Heritage Studies, to name only a few.

In the early 1970's, two other developments eventually led to the emergence of cultural pluralism as a significant concept in education. One of these developments was what Michael Novak has called the "rise of the unmeltable ethnics". He was referring to the rising ethnic consciousness of those white ethnic groups, mostly of working class backgrounds, who had been subjected to the Americanization process I described earlier.

The second, almost simultaneous development was the Feminist Movement. Many of the issues raised by the feminists, such as sex discrimination and the low self-expectations of women, were not unlike those raised by white ethnic groups and those raised earlier by minorities.

It has been within the context of this ferment of conflict and change that the concept of cultural pluralism in education, as embodied in the field of multicultural education, first evolved some 10 years ago. The concept grew, I think, out of the recognition that all of these movements of minorities, white ethnics and women were basically seeking the same ultimate goal; namely, a more democratic society in which there would be greater

equality in all spheres of life.

Through this evolutionary process, multicultural education appears to have been first conceived as multi-ethnic studies; that is, as a consolidation of Asian, Black, Hispanic and Native American Studies. It was then broadened to incorporate white ethnic studies. And more recently, many of its advocates have included feminist viewpoints.

RE-EXAMINATION OF THE CONCEPT OF CULTURAL PLURALISM

With that rather cursory review of the historical background to the emergence of the concept of cultural pluralism in education, let me now move on to re-examine the concept itself. I should note parenthetically that in addition to cultural pluralism, there are also various other forms of pluralism. As I'll indicate later, the distinctions between these various forms may be important.

For the moment, however, let me restrict my discussion to the concept of cultural pluralism. This concept is usually taken to be the fundamental basis for multicultural education; in fact, multicultural education has been defined as the institutionalization of the concept of cultural pluralism in the schools.

The problem is that most definitions of cultural pluralism in use in the field are rather vague and general. It is usually defined in terms of some ideal multi-ethnic society in which the various ethnic groups have mutual respect for each other, enjoy equal rights, and are able to preserve and foster their cultural traditions. Thus, cultural pluralism refers to an idealistic goal toward which we may aspire; whereas, when we talk about cultural diversity, we may be referring to an existing, but not necessarily desirable, situation.

Unfortunately, there are a number of problems with such definitions, which have not only left multicultural education quite vulnerable to its critics, but have also led to misguided notions about its goals. Let me discuss what I believe are some of the more serious problems.

First of all, I think these definitions place too much emphasis on the culture of an ethnic group. They seem to imply that if each ethnic group is able to maintain its culture, the problems of racism, sexism and class inequality--the major societal concerns that led to the development of multicultural education--will somehow disappear. In my opinion, this is a rather naive view that ignores the complex causes of these problems.

Secondly, I think these definitions do not adequately convey what I call the two-sided dialectical nature of cultural pluralism. It is not enough to say that there will be unity with diversity. Critics have charged that the promotion of cultural pluralism will lead to unbridled ethnicity and intensify conflicts between ethnic groups. We certainly cannot lightly dismiss such charges, especially in light of the recent mayoral election here in Chicago, which was clearly polarized along ethnic lines. What happened in this election is even more disconcerting when you consider the fact that the Ethnic Heritage Studies Program, which funded many white ethnic studies and multicultural education programs, was initiated through the efforts of white ethnic groups in the Chicago area back in the early 1970's. Thus, I think the way in which we conceive of cultural pluralism might have some very real social consequences.

Such problems arise, I believe, because insufficient attention has been paid to the dialectic between the particular aspects of an ethnic subculture and the universal aspects of the larger common culture. To take an extreme example given by Harvard sociologist Orlando Patterson, suppose an ethnic

subculture believed in human sacrifice as one of its religious practices. Now the question is this: Would this practice be allowed by the larger society under a policy of cultural pluralism? I think the answer would clearly be no--particuarly if they were sacrificing people outside their own ethnic group! In such a situation, they would undoubtedly be forced to conform to society's universal prohibition against murder.

A less extreme, but more controversial example is the issue of abortion. Is that murder or isn't it? Here we have a conflict over whether a value should be universal or particularistic. Pluralistic societies are often faced with many such questions and must resolve them based on some theory of justice that weighs the rights of individuals and groups against the best interests of society as a whole.

Thus, I believe in a form of cultural pluralism in which universal and particularistic values would be dialectically balanced against each other. For example, I believe cultural pluralism must incorporate the universal values of equality, freedom and democracy, as well as the particularistic values associated with the maintenance of cultural diversity. Unfortunately, this two-sided, dialectical nature of cultural pluralism is rarely underlined and, as a consequence, it is often misunderstood as license for what I call runaway, laissez faire ethnicity, rather than as a way of avoiding such ethnocentric behavior.

Thirdly, I think these definitions seem to promote a cultural relativism according to which all aspects of every ethnic subculture are seen as worth maintaining and respecting. This type of cultural relativism can be criticized on several grounds. It has misled some into romanticizing an ethnic subculture, even to the extent that they accept oppressive or exploitive elements of that subculture as enriching and worth respecting. Such a romantic view overlooks the fact that ethnic subcultures are

continually changing under the influence of many forces. An ethnic group must often adapt to these forces and to the larger society in order to survive, even as it struggles for self-determination. And it's my contention that this complex dialectical interplay between necessity and autonomy may produce both strengths and weaknesses in an ethnic group's culture.

For minority groups, racial oppression has been a major influencing force and, in some cases, has produced distortions in cultural behavior patterns. A case in point are the Asian Americans, who have been characterized as conforming, respectful of authority, nonassertive and passive. While it is true that some of these characteristics may be traced to traditional Asian cultural behavior patterns, these patterns appear to have been significantly distorted by the effects of racial discrimination and, in the context of American society, can serve to keep Asian Americans in a subordinate position. Thus, in this and other cases, the concept of cultural pluralism, if misapplied, may result in perpetuating inequalities, rather than eliminating them.

Finally, I think these definitions assume that the changes necessary to reach the desired state of cultural pluralism can be achieved within the existing social structure. However, I think we have to realize that the social structure of a society can exert a strong influence on the development and interactions of the various subcultures that make up the society. In this regard, I think it's significant that an increasing number of social analysts are coming to the conclusion that the social structure of most modern, industrialized societies are quite incompatible with the envisioned state of cultural pluralism. They believe that the nature of technology, the huge impersonal bureaucracies and the increasing centralization of power in these societies have severely intensified alienation as manifested in the growing

sense of powerlessness and lack of meaning in life felt by more and more people. So, unless changes in attitudes, values and human relationships are accompanied by fundamental structural changes, I think cultural pluralism will remain only a utopian dream.

That completes my re-examination of the concept of cultural pluralism. At this point, however, I think you'd be justified in asking whether I have a better alternative to offer. Let me just say that despite my criticisms, I would certainly not abandon the concept of cultural pluralism, or more accurately, the concept of pluralism. However, I would extend the concept beyond culture and attempt to describe an alternative social structure that would be more compatible with a culturally pluralistic society. Perhaps a better term for this extended concept would be socioeconomic cultural pluralism.

Now I'm neither wise enough or foolish enough to prescribe exactly what such a society might look like, but I think I can at least describe it in a very general way. In my view, the development of an ideal society compatible with cultural pluralism would require the elimination of most of the centralized bureaucracies, large corporations and over-congested urban centers, and their replacement by a decentralized system of self-governing communities. These communities would be governed as participatory political and economic democracies in which everyone is insured of a decent standard of living, individual and group differences are respected, and the rights and freedoms of all individuals are gauranteed. Each of these communities would develop a large degree of economic and technological self-sufficiency within the context of maintaining a sensible ecological balance. However, all of these communities would cooperate with each other within a larger framework of regional, national and international coordinating agencies.

Basically, what I'm describing is a decentralized structure as opposed to

our present highly-centralized structure. Thus, the pluralism I'm describing is both structural and cultural, which is why I have referred to it as socioeconomic cultural pluralism. There are good reasons for proposing such a structure, and I'll allude to some of these later in my talk.

Now, I'll be the first to admit that this description of the ideal pluralistic society is rather vague and general. Moreover, you're probably asking yourself right about now, "So what! Why talk about such a utopian dream? And besides, what good is this vision of a better society for the purposes of education?"

Well, in answer to the first question, "So what! Why talk about such a utopian dream?", let me just say that the ideal pluralistic society I just described may possibly be an achieveable dream, not an impossible one. In fact, I believe there are significant developments in this direction taking place even now. Some of these include the development of more appropriate forms of technology that increase self-sufficiency and reduce pollution, community-based urban rehabilitation projects, the establishment of community land and housing trusts, the recent actions of consumer action groups to reduce the monopoly power of multinational corporations, and the growing interest in decentralized economic systems, to name only a few.

Furthermore, there are certain critical global trends, such as the increasing scarcity in the world's natural resources, over-population, the ever-widening impact of environmental pollution, and the growing demand by Third World countries for a new international economic order, that may push us even faster toward such a society. This is not to say that the ideal pluralistic society will be realized in a few short years, or even in our lifetimes. However, I think there's a significant trend in that direction, which makes me hopeful that such a society may be an achieveable goal toward

which we may at least aspire.

Which brings me to the second question: "What good is this vision of a better society for the purposes of education?" Perhaps John Dewey provided the answer to this question when he wrote that "the conception of education as a social process and function has no definite meaning until we define the kind of society we have in mind;" that is, until we have defined our vision of an achievable better society. Dewey believed that students should be prepared not for a defective existing society, but for an ideal society in which the highest human ideals are achievable and toward which their aspirations could be directed.

A RETROSPECTIVE ANALYSIS OF THE ASIAN/PACIFIC AMERICAN MOVEMENT

Having reviewed the historical background to the concept of cultural pluralism and having re-examined the concept itself, let me next analyze retrospectively how the Asian/Pacific American Movement fits into all of this.

The origins of the Asian/Pacific American Movement go back to the turbulent decade of the 1960's. As many of you know, Asian/Pacific Americans did not get involved in the various movements of that period until the late 1960's. At that time, Asian/Pacific American students, primarily on college campuses on the West Coast, started organizing themselves around such issues as Asian/Pacific American Studies and Affirmative Action. This movement quickly spread to the East Coast and the Midwest and into the various Asian/Pacific American communities. Before this time, Asian Americans were being hailed either as the "model minority" or as the "invisible silent minority". We were viewed as the minority group that had pulled itself up by our own bootstraps, took care of our own, and had no serious social problems. However, many of us took strong exception to this stereotypic view, and argued

that there were many problems in the Asian/Pacific American communities that were being swept under the rug or simply being ignored. It took a number of years, but government agencies finally began to hear us and to consider Asian/Pacific Americans as a minority group and to include them in funded educational and social programs.

As a consequence, government agencies eventually poured several million dollars into the Asian/Pacific American communities for various programs in social services, community mental health, health care services, bilingual and multicultural education, drug abuse, the elderly, and many other areas. At the same time, there was a proliferation of various Asian/Pacific American advocacy organizations at the local, state and national levels--organizations like the Asian American Education Commission, the Organization of Chinese Americans, the Pacific/Asian Coalition, the Asian American Businessmen's Alliance, Chinese for Affirmative Action, the Asian American Council of Greater Philadelphia, the Chinatown Planning Council, the National Association of Asian and Pacific American Education, and many, many more.

Literally hundreds of organizations sprouted up nationwide to advocate for the interests and needs of Asian/Pacific Americans. Some of these organizations have disappeared, but many of them still exist today and have formed local, state and national networks that often bring these organizations together for collective action on various issues. These networks have taken 15 years to build, and in the process, we have made some gains and suffered some losses.

Which brings me to the question: What have we learned from this experience? Let me first address this question in the broader context of the society as a whole; and then address it from the perspective of Asian/Pacific Americans.

In retrospect, as a society, I think we learned a number of lessons from

our efforts at societal change during the 1960's and 1970's. The first and perhaps hardest lesson we learned was that society is much tougher to change in significant ways than we ever thought in the 1960's. While there have been some significant advances in such areas as civil rights, affirmative action in employment, and access to education, among other areas, most of the major social problems continue to plague us, such as the persistence of poverty, racism and other forms of social oppression, the centralization and abuse of power, unequal educational opportunity, interethnic conflicts, and many, many others.

I think we have come to the realization that these problems are deeply rooted in the very social structure of our society and that their solution will require fundamental changes in that structure--changes that will probably require a long-term commitment that may go beyond our lifetimes and a much more sophisticated understanding of how our society functions.

I think we also learned that many of the programs that were designed to help the poor and the powerless often created a dependency--a welfare mentality--that not only was dehumanizing and humiliating, but also led to the "rip-off" attitude that anything you could get out of the government--by hook or crook--was okay. These programs rarely did anything to develop economic self-sufficiency and political independence that are necessary for both dignity and self-determination. In many ways, the dependency on the government developed by many minority communities is similar to the dependency of many Third World countries on the more industrially-advanced countries of the world. So, we learned that spending billions of dollars on programs does not necessarily solve the problems.

In fact, in some respects, government funding served more to pacify discontent and unrest, to treat the symptoms rather than the basic causes of

the problems. As a consequence, government funds were sometimes used to buy off vocal and militant leaders of the minority communities, and millions of dollars in government funds were ripped off in the guise of helping the poor. Even more insidious was the development of a huge cadre of so-called professional service providers--government bureaucrats whose own generous salaries and expenses siphoned off most of the funds allocated to these programs for the poor. In fact, it's been estimated that only about one dollar in every ten spent on the anti-poverty programs ever actually reached and directly benefited the poor.

In the field of education, we also learned some important lessons. For example, we learned that schools are a lot harder to change than we expected, and that the schools cannot serve as the primary vehicle for changing society. In fact, we now realize that schools are among the most conservative of society's institutions and largely serve to preserve the status quo, rather than changing it. The schools alone, we discovered, cannot change society, unless there are simultaneous changes in the other institutions of our society, particularly in the economic and political sectors. We also learned that many educational programs, like the anti-poverty programs, often served the vested interests of the program managers and professional educators, rather than the best interests of the children they were supposedly designed to serve. Such self-serving cooptation has occurred in many educational programs, including programs in compensatory education, desegregation, and multicultural and bilingual education.

I think most of you can think of specific examples of what I have been talking about in the Asian/Pacific American communities. We have also had our share of so-called "rip-off" programs funded by the government in our communities. Furthermore, the government has pumped millions of dollars into programs for research and needs assessments that appear to have had little,

or no benefit, for the Asian/Pacific American communities. In fact, one has to stop and wonder whether the poor might have benefited more if the government had not funded these programs, but had simply given the money directly to the poor. At the same time, I should hasten to add that there have been many programs that have provided important, even crucial, services to the Asian/Pacific American communities, and that these communities are undoubtedly better off because of these services. Nevertheless, I think we have to re-examine the long-term benefits of such programs and find out whether there are more effective alternative approaches.

CURRENT PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES FACING ASIAN/PACIFIC AMERICANS

With that quick retrospective analysis, let me now move to the present and discuss some of the current problems and challenges facing Asian/Pacific Americans, particularly in the field of education.

In the current economic and political climate, we who are educators are obviously facing some very difficult years ahead. Student enrollments in the schools are projected to decline at least through the 1980's, which means that additional teachers may be laid off and budgets may be further reduced. If the near-depression in the economy continues, we can expect to see even more drastic cuts in the financing of the schools at all levels of education, including higher education. And finally, under the so-called New Federalism of the Reagan Administration, we can expect to see continuing reductions in Federal support for all levels of education, and the increasing reliance on the block grant mechanism for what little Federal funding for education that remains. We can expect to see similar cuts in Federal support for social programs as well.

Let me say a few words about the block grant mechanism that is being

pushed so hard by the Reagan Administration. Since I was appointed last year by former Governor Jerry Brown to the California Block Grant Advisory Committee for Education and just finished serving on that committee, I can speak from firsthand experience on this subject. First of all, we should not be misled by the Reagan Administration's claim that the block grant is a mechanism for returning power to local communities and to allow these communities more of a voice in setting their own priorities. As a number of political analysts have pointed out, the block grant mechanism is seen by the Reagan Administration as a way of defusing and fragmenting the national social movements and advocacy networks that have been developed as a result of the Federal programs that were established in the 1960's and 1970's.

Despite all the problems with these programs that I've mentioned, the one effective thing they did do was to establish national networks of advocates who could pressure the Federal government in Washington to pay attention to the needs of their constituencies--the poor and the powerless. There was a single focal point, Washington, D.C., on which this pressure could be applied. However, under the block grant mechanism, pressure can no longer be applied to a single entity, but must now be applied to fifty state governments and many, many more local government entities, ranging from city councils to county boards of supervisors to local school boards. Moreover, the various interest groups will now tend to be much more highly in competition with each other, intensifying the conflicts over increasingly scarce resources.

I can attest that this is definitely what is happening with the education block grant in California. It has not only increased the conflicts between various groups, but has also increased the levels of bureaucracy since more levels of government must now intervene in the process of dispensing the funds. At the same time, it has not really increased local and state control

of education since about 90 percent of the funding for the schools came from the state and local communities in the first place. Thus, it appears that the real purposes of the block grant mechanism are to defuse the national social movements that had developed during the 1960's and 1970's, and to serve as a smoke screen for the devastating cuts in the budgets of most of the major Federal programs in education and human services, all under the rhubric of the New Federalism.

All of these developments present a rather grim outlook for the next several years, and those of us in education will undoubtedly be operating in crisis-like conditions. However, if we are to find even the thinnest silver lining in this terribly gloomy picture, we must view it as a time to turn crisis into opportunity. We can do this by frankly admitting that there were many defects and shortcomings in the various Federal programs that were mounted in the 1960's and 1970's. In the absence of a crisis, such an admission probably would not be made and nothing would be done to fundamentally change the nature and direction of these programs. Although many of these programs are currently being dismantled, many of them will undoubtedly be reconstructed under a different Administration, perhaps in 2 to 6 years. When that occurs, we will have the opportunity to completely redesign these programs to eliminate their defects and shortcomings, and arrive at better conceived approaches to solving our social problems. Let me, therefore, spend the remainder of my talk discussing such future alternatives and relating them to the concept of socioeconomic cultural pluralism.

ALTERNATIVES FOR THE FUTURE

In my opinion, neither the Democrats nor the Republicans have provided the vision and leadership that will be necessary to find effective, long-

lasting solutions to our major social problems. The Democrats have essentially based their programs on successive modifications of the New Deal policies and strategies of the 1930's, and have not come up with any really new and creative alternatives. On the other hand, the Republicans would still have us believe that the "invisible hand" that Adam Smith talked about will somehow make our capitialistic system work for us if we only removed the constraints of government. Neither party has provided the creative vision and leadership that I think we need in the critical years that lie ahead. We need new ideas and approaches that are not tied to these two outdated ideologies.

Fortunately, there are a few leaders and thinkers with vision who are coming up with some creative alternatives. These alternatives are directly related to the concept of socioeconomic cultural pluralism that I discussed earlier and are based on two important strategies: One is to have local communities develop economic self-sufficiency to the degree that is possible in today's interdependent world. And the second is to decentralize political power in our society, again, to the extent that is possible. As simple as these two strategies may sound, they have major implications for social policy and programs.

For example, consider the typical training programs which are designed to help the poor get jobs. More often than not, after undergoing such training, people must usually go far outside their communities to actually find jobs. Such an approach to helping the poor does not enable their communities to develop the economic self-sufficiency necessary to build a self-sustaining economic base. These communities usually continue to be largely dependent on the economic base of other communities. An alternative approach would be to help the poor develop their own businesses within their own communities. Such an approach would not only train people and create jobs, but would also build an economic base for these communities. Any business enterprise developed

through this approach might be limited in size, say to no more than 300 workers, and could be cooperatively owned by the workers. In relationship to other businesses, however, the business could function as a free enterprise. Such an approach has been proposed by a number of decentralist economists, such as E.F. Schumacher, the author of Small Is Beautiful. These analysts contend that such an approach would not only develop economic self-sufficiency for communities, but would also prevent the centralization and abuse of power by limiting the size of businesses and by structuring them to be more socially responsible. If such an approach were adopted by government programs designed to combat poverty, poor communities might eventually wean themselves of dependency on welfare and other forms of government subsidy and gain much greater control over their own destinies.

Ironically, many Asian/Pacific American communities appear to be shifting from an approach based on self-sufficiency and self-reliance to one that is dependent on government funding. While I do not dispute that these communities have usually been legitimately in need of such funding, I think that in the process of accepting these funds, they sometimes discarded the idea of self-sufficiency, replacing it with the idea that we should try to get as much funding from the government as possible. I think the Asian/Pacific American communities have to rethink this rather tricky issue. In many respects, the idea of "taking care of our own" and "pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps" was not all bad if it were not taken to the extremes of rejecting all government funding. I think we can accept government funding, and still believe in these values, if we use the funds for programs that will increase the self-sufficiency and self-reliance of our communities. Therefore, I think we need to rethink in some fundamental ways the approaches we take in developing social programs in the Asian/Pacific American

communities.

Finally, let me talk about some alternative approaches to educational programs, particularly as they apply to Asian/Pacific Americans. The major thrust in education for Asian/Pacific Americans has probably been in the area of bilingual education, and to a lesser degree, multicultural education. I believe that programs in both areas need to be re-examined and reconceived.

Generally, bilingual education has been primarily concerned with bridging the gap between the home language and culture of non-English-speaking or limited-English-speaking students and the language and culture of the dominant group in order to provide equal educational opportunity for these students. Whereas, multicultural education, as discussed earlier, has tried to incorporate the concept of cultural pluralism into the schools, as a way of also providing equal educational opportunity.

I think the problem with many programs in both bilingual and multicultural education is that they have often become exclusively preoccuppied with language and culture to the neglect of other important related issues. For example, many well-intentioned educators promote multiculturalism in rather superficial ways by simply celebrating ethnicity by highlighting ethnic foods, holidays and costumes; or by merely incorporating ethnic content in their curricula. What they often overlook or conveniently forget are the social realities of racism, sexism and class inequality. In my opinion, such approaches can contribute little to promoting greater democracy, equality and freedom in our society.

Another problem I have with some of these programs is that they sometimes naively promote ethnic consciousness and pride and may be inadvertently developing ethnically-chauvanistic attitudes that may actually increase polarization between ethnic groups. For example, I have observed some Asian/Pacific Americans become so preoccuppied with issues of ethnic identity

and ethnic self-interests that they have been misled into believing these issues are ends in themselves. Such an orientation has often led to a self-indulgent ethnocentrism that may be psychologically gratifying, but does little to promote greater intergroup understanding and cooperation. It has also led to the exploitation of the Asian/Pacific American Movement by self-serving individuals and groups in the name of ethnic self-determination and to divisive conflicts with other ethnic groups in competition over scarce resources.

I think we must take a broader, longer-range view of the purposes of education. It is becoming increasingly clear that the next 2-3 decades are going to be extremely critical ones in which the very survival of humanity may be at stake. Even some of the most sober-minded analysts are predicting that we will face a number of unprecedented crises within this period of time. As mentioned earlier, these crises include the very real possiblities of massive starvation, worldwide pollution, the depletion of our nonrenewable resources, and nuclear holacaust. All of these crises could occur within our lifetimes, and certainly within the lifetimes of the students who are presently in school. If we are to prepare these students to avert these crises, we must radically change the way in which we are educating them.

First of all, I believe we must teach them to think critically so that they can analyze and understand what's wrong with our society and how it might be improved. To this end, they must be exposed to the problems of poverty, racism, sexism and alienation in general, and be given the necessary knowledge, understanding and skills to enable them to find solutions to these problems. Furthermore, they should be helped to conceptualize and aspire toward a vision of a better society and to develop the necessary commitment to move the society toward greater equality and freedom and the eradication of

degrading poverty and dehumanizing dependency. The concept of socioeconomic cultural pluralism, which I presented earlier, can be a very useful one in developing an educational program for these purposes.

These are admittedly very ambitious goals to have for the schools. However, I'm not suggesting that the schools alone can change society. As I mentioned earlier, one lesson we learned in the sixties was that the schools cannot be the primary vehicle for social change. What I am suggesting is that we can at least prepare students to create the necessary changes once they leave school and begin to pursue their careers in society. In the face of the crises I have mentioned, there is little question that society will undergo major changes within the next 2-3 decades--the only question is whether these changes will be for the better or for the worse.

If you accept this scenario of the future that I've just painted, I would suggest that we need to rethink how we approach and conceive of programs in bilingual and multicultural education. Programs in both areas must, I believe, help Asian/Pacific American students develop basic survival skills to help them meet the enormous challenges that lie before them. Certainly, basic competency in English is one of these skills, and to the extent that it develops this competency, bilingual education is important. Similarly, competency in cross-cultural communication is another of these skills, and to the extent that it develops this competency, multicultural education is important. However, I believe that programs in both areas must also develop other survival skills to which I have alluded. Unfortunately, most of these programs do not develop these other skills and should, therefore, be reconceived in broader, more relevant terms. What I think we need is a more comprehensive and sophisticated conceptual framework within which to develop these programs. While I don't have time here to describe such a framework, I think I have given you some idea of the ways in which I think these programs

might be reconceptualized if we are to prepare Asian/Pacific American students and students in general for the formidable problems they face in the decades ahead.

At this point, some of you may be wondering how in the world Asian/Pacific Americans are going to be able to have any impact on the problems of the magnitude I have been talking about. Given our small numbers in this country, it may seem that we can play only a peripheral role in any efforts at change. However, there are certain developments on the international level that may cast Asian/Pacific Americans in a far more significant role. What I'm talking about is the increasing international trade between the United States and the countries of the Pacific Basin, particularly the countries of Asia which contain over 50 percent of the world's population. In 1980 the United States conducted more than $100 billion in trade with the Asian countries, which was more than the trade with all of the European countries. And over the next decade or two, it's been estimated that the trade between the United States and Asia could total between $2 and $3 trillion and will be several times greater than that with the European countries.

As a result of this global change in the patterns of international trade, the financial capital of this country is expected to shift within the next decade or two from New York City to Los Angeles, and the entire Western United States will undergo, and, in fact, is already undergoing, a profound transformation due to the resulting huge influx of capital. Since we know that cultural transformation usually follows closely on the heels of capital transformation, we can expect that the various Pacific Basin cultures will increasingly influence and transform American culture, which is presently rooted primarily in Western European culture. As these profound changes take

place, Asian/Pacific Americans could be in a opportune position to play a highly influential role in the resulting cultural, economic, political, and educational transformations. However, if those of us who are in education wish to take advantage of this rapidly developing situation, we must develop a broader vision of the purposes of education, and be more creative in our approaches to education.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In concluding, let me say that I think we would all do well if we were to resurrect some of the ideals of the 1960's and reaffirm our commitment to many of the idealistic goals of that era. It would also behoove us, I think, if we were to remind ourselves of President John F. Kennedy's famous statement in his inaugural address in 1961, when he appealed to the young by telling them (and I quote): "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." In a similar vein, today, I think we need to ask what we can do for our communities, not what the government can do for us or for our communities. Only in this way can we ultimately gain self-determination for our communities and begin to build a truly democratic society that can withstand the impending crises facing the current generation of students.

Thank you very much.